

Benedictine Monasticism and Abingdon Abbey

Monastic communities were founded in the Christian Church as a response to the desire of men and women to seek God through a life of self-discipline and prayer. The earliest monks, in fourth-century Egypt, were solitary, desert-dwelling hermits, but their followers became so numerous that communities formed around them for worship, protection, and mutual support. This same pattern of development characterized the life of St Benedict (c.480-c.550). Drawing on his experience of leadership of the communities that gathered around him and on a wider monastic tradition, he drew up a *Rule*, known as the Rule of St Benedict, that became and has remained the most influential guide to the religious life in Western Christianity.

Benedict understood the monastery to be ‘a school of the Lord’s service’, and he wrote his Rule not so much for spiritual heroes as for ordinary people of varied abilities. His counsels were of moderation, to build up the weak but also to spur on the strong, so that all might climb the ladder of perfection according to their abilities. The keynotes of this model for community life are stability (commitment to the community), conversion of manners (spiritual transformation according to the pattern of Jesus Christ), and obedience (freedom from self-will being a pathway to God). Members retain no personal possessions; they give all property to the community.

As well as being a guide for the spiritual life, the Rule provides a structure for the practical life of the community, from the election of the abbot who is its head, to the appointment of officials, the round of daily living, the provision of hospitality (Benedict insists that all guests should ‘be welcomed as Christ himself’), and advice for reconciling conflict. The chief task of the community is the *opus Dei*, the work of prayer in the seven ‘hours’ of communal prayer distributed through the day and night. Benedict envisaged on average some four hours of the day to be occupied in liturgical prayer, about the same time in private prayer and spiritual reading, and six hours in manual labour to provide for the material needs of the community.

In the world of the early middle ages, monasteries were understood as having crucial social functions. Monks were seen as spiritual soldiers, more important even than the soldiers of earthly armies, for they fought against supernatural enemies. The monastery was a spiritual castle, and benefactors conferred gifts of land and money on monasteries in order that the monks might pray for their temporal and eternal welfare. For the children of noble families, the vocation of a monk was as honourable as any secular calling, and monks regularly exercised the highest offices in church and state.

Because of their spiritual function and their wealth in lands and property, monasteries were hubs of everyday life. Pilgrims sought out their miracle-working relics, which were a mainstay of popular religion. Abingdon had a large collection of relics, including those of St Vincent of Saragossa (the first Spanish martyr) and the ‘Black Cross’ of Abingdon, believed to have been fashioned from a nail of the True Cross. Abingdon, like many other abbeys, controlled the trade that took place in the market place at its gate, which frequently aroused local resentment. Abbeys were often the only providers of a range of social services – the giving of alms to the poor and of medical care to the sick (in Abingdon through the abbey’s St John’s Hospital), and of education (the abbey’s school later developed into today’s Abingdon School). Monastic schools were one of the few means of social mobility; poor boys of ability could, through the monastery, rise to the highest offices in the land. Within a society that was mostly illiterate, monastic libraries preserved the knowledge of classical antiquity and even of the Islamic world for succeeding generations.

Monasteries were focuses for employment, craftsmanship, and artistic, musical and technical innovation and excellence. For Abingdon, this was most notably the case during the abbacy of St Æthelwold (953-963). With St Dunstan of Canterbury and St Oswald of Worcester, he led the revival and reform of Benedictine monasticism in England. His innovations were many: chroniclers credit him with the introduction of the exemplary chant technique from the Abbey of Fleury in France, with the installation of an organ and the founding of bells. He built a monastic church of dignity and splendour and furnished it with stone sculpture and gold and silver metalwork, and he was responsible for works of civil engineering, including the digging of the stream from the Thames that powered the monastic watermill. He accomplished all this in addition to being a leading statesman, scholar, and teacher.

Life in monasteries, as in all human institutions, had both high and low points. Periods when the communities seemed to have lost sight of their founding ideals were followed by periods of reform. Although they were accused, at the time of the Reformation, of endemic corruption, there is little historical evidence for this. Certainly there were scandals, but they were very rare. ‘The inmates of a few religious houses could live in opulent idleness, but most monasteries were workaday communities offering charity, education, employment, and prayers for departed souls.’¹ When Henry VIII decided to suppress the monasteries in order to take over their revenues, the Abbot of Abingdon surrendered his monastery to the Crown without protest – those who resisted closure risked execution for treason – in 1538, when there were 25 monks left in the community.

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¹ Christopher Haigh, *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987) 3.